



Annual AIDS Awareness March on December 1

UNAIDS and the Women's Club of Aruba introduce this year's theme and E FARO

For twenty years, the Women's Club of Aruba in conjunction with UNAIDS has been sponsoring the annual march through either Oranjestad or San Nicolass for International AIDS Awareness Day, which takes place on December 1. AIDS Awareness activists and concerned citizens join in a candlelight march, along with hundreds of thousands of other marchers around the world. This year it will take place soon after sunset in Oranjestad, beginning at the DOA across from the Valaro Station on L.G. Smith Boulevard, and ending with a ceremony at Fort Zoutman.

On November 23, Sharline Koolman-Wever, coordinator in Aruba for HIV/AIDS was joined by the Director of the Department of Health, Trevor van Gellecum and Vanessa Tromp, president of the Women's Club Committee for Education in encouraging all islanders to join in the parade, but more importantly, to understand the message of this year's theme.

The OUCH! campaign from CAREC (the Caribbean Epidemiology Center) slogan is "*Stigma and discrimination does not protect against HIV...IT HURTS.*" The reasoning behind the campaign is that the natural, instinctive reaction to pain is: **OUCH!** The pain suffered by persons infected with HIV who are stigmatized by the insensitive, and the discrimination practiced against them, could be far worse than the infection itself. Simply put, stigma hurts; discrimination hurts; consequently, we are *all* hurt. More importantly in this message is that individuals must take personal responsibility for protecting themselves, rather than discriminating against PWA's (People with AIDS,) as personal responsibility and the practice of "safe sex" is the only way to stem the tide of this dread disease.

Several booklets that are easily understandable for all ages have been published as part the campaign. Also joining the UNAIDS representative as a presenter at the introductory meeting were Edwin B. Abath, program officer in Aruba for HIV/AIDS, and Ruben Odor, the president of E FARO, a support organization for those infected with AIDS, and the first person in Aruba to be diagnosed with HIV sixteen years ago.

Mr. Abath presented the TV spots that will accompany the campaign for understanding and awareness, and Mr. Odor spoke of his own experiences of discrimination that he has personally suffered, as have other members of E FARO. E FARO means "The Lighthouse," and the foundations slogan is "The Light of Hope." It symbolizes a light that shines for victims in the darkness of their despair, as anyone will feel when first being diagnosed with HIV. Such a diagnoses has carried a stigma with it for the last twenty years that often those contracting the disease lie about it or keep it secret, which only contributes to its continued rise in victims. For those that find themselves infected, knowing that there is an organization to help and support, educate and assist an HIV victim in securing their human rights is a great comfort, aside from helping them to realize they can live long, productive lives with proper treatment. The organization E FARO can be contacted for information and advice by calling telephone number 582-3040.

In the past ten years, the Caribbean has become the number two location for the largest percentage of the population infected with HIV, after Africa. Aruba has very few cases reported of HIV, with eighty-four receiving treatment, as many of the reported cases were immigrants from other islands, who returned to their home countries. Still, it is the constant education of the youth, and the public, that is the only real weapon against the spread of HIV/AIDS. New figures from the Pan American Health Organization revealed that reported HIV/AIDS cases in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia are skyrocketing, and possibly may surpass the Caribbean very soon. The spread of HIV/AIDS is born of poverty and ignorance, and though the victims may be discriminated against by their community, the disease does not practice discrimination, and will infect anyone that is not aware or reckless. The most new cases of HIV/AIDS are occurring in the age range of fifteen to forty-four years, when people are most sexually active, and so there is the greater chance of spreading the disease. Health organizations are well aware of various other ways in which HIV/AIDS can be transmitted aside from sexual contact, and proper precautions are now taken to prevent infection. The simple fact is that one will no longer contract HIV/AIDS from a blood transfusion, or dirty needles (accept perhaps for drug addicts,) but through unprotected sexual contact.

During the months of November 2006 through February of 2007, various events will be taking place around the world to bring home the message of the OUCH! campaign. Ms. Vanessa Tromp, on behalf of The Women's Club, urged the public to join in the December 1 march, and to seek information about HIV/AIDS, which is readily available from the Department of Health.